

U.S. House Committee on International Relations Subcommittee on Africa, Global Human Rights and International Operations and Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific

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Thank you Mr. Chairmen and Mr. Ranking Members for giving me the opportunity to speak today about the situation of human rights in eastern Burma. I would also like to thank Ambassador Christopher Hill and Assistant Secretary Barry Lowenkron for their commitments to human rights in Burma and around the world.

I am originally from the Shan State, located in northeastern Burma, and am a member of the Shan Women's Action Network (SWAN), based in Thailand. I am working to improve the lives of women inside Burma as well as the lives of those refugees who have been displaced by the violence and terror of Burma's military regime.

It is a horrible reality that for hundreds of thousands of people, human rights abuses are a daily part of life. Much of eastern Burma, where I grew up, is like hell on earth. Since the mid-1990s the ruling military regime has launched an all-out effort to block any and all forms of resistance to their rule inside Burma and to consolidate their control over the country.

Eastern Burma, much of which is rural countryside and tropical jungle, is quite different from the urban areas around Mandalay and Rangoon. Prior to the mid-1990s the military regime did not control these regions. Ethnic leaders and armies kept the regime at bay and away from the local population, providing protection and safety. For hundreds of years, Shan, Karen, Karenni, and other leaders ruled our territories and served as our local governments. Ethnic leaders who previously were able to provide protection and safety to these populations are, today, unable to do so. Instead, we live in fear.

Over the past decade, the military regime undertook vicious measures to decapitate ethnic resistance movements once and for all. They carried out major military attacks against civilian populations in order to gain total control. However, the regime had a difficult time making progress because many people support the resistance.

In order to stop the resistance movements, the military regime has targeted civilian populations with a policy known as the "four cuts" campaign. The intent of this campaign is to cut off resistance movements from the population. In reality, it has meant carrying out widespread human rights abuses against innocent villagers by cutting food supplies, communications, and money, and forcibly relocating civilian populations off their land.

From 1996 until late 2004, over 2,500 villages were destroyed by the military regime in eastern Burma. Sometimes the regime announced in advance that they were going to burn our villages, in other cases they attacked by surprise. Most people who had to flee

did not have the chance to collect their belongings, and many left a lifetime of savings and capital behind. Those who have had the most difficulty are our elders and children, they can not move as quickly to escape attacks.

Over one million people have fled their homes and became refugees or, even worse, internally displaced persons. At least 700,000 refugees have fled the country. Some of these refugees are permitted in refugee camps. Neighboring countries such as Thailand do not allow all the Burmese fleeing the regime's violence into refugee camps because they are fearful that it will encourage more refugees. But this is wrong—people are fleeing anyway and they are only fleeing because they fear for their lives. If they could safely stay in Burma, they would.

Worse than being a refugee is being an internally displaced person. Over 1/2 million people live inside Burma as internally displaced persons. It is too dangerous for many of them to flee as refugees, so they hide out in the jungle and grow secret crops to sustain themselves, or forage for food. The military regime often hunts them down like animals.

Now the regime is planning to build a series of mega-dams on the Salween River in the ethnic areas where it has forcibly relocated these peoples. The regime will sell the power from the dams to Thailand, while the flood-zones will permanently displace tens of thousands of people.

By destroying the local governance structures of our peoples, the military regime has also created a public health emergency in eastern Burma. Many people can not receive any medical care, contributing to high mortality rates from infectious diseases which can be prevented and treated, such as malaria and tuberculosis. According to the most recent report on internally displaced persons in eastern Burma, child mortality and nutrition rates are similar to those among IDPs in the Horn of Africa.

In a carefully crafted campaign to further cripple and punish Burma's ethnic minorities, the military regime will not permit access for health workers to areas most in need and where populations are most vulnerable. In the jungles and mountains of eastern Burma, where malaria is devastating to the people, the military regime forbids or severely restricts humanitarian assistance. The regime's refusal to allow free access to aid workers has caused humanitarian organizations to leave Burma, including the United Nations Global Fund for AIDs, Tuberculosis, and Malaria. Last month, Doctors Without Borders (France) announced it was leaving.

In addition to forcing people to flee their homes, Burma's military regime has also carried out a policy of using rape as a weapon of war against Shan and other ethnic nationalities in my country. SWAN has interviewed and documented countless cases of rape by soldiers of the ruling military regime in Burma in a report we wrote entitled "Licensed to Rape". We found that among the rapes we documented, at least 83% were committed by officers, usually in front of their own troops to further humiliate the victims. The rapes involved extreme brutality, including torture such as beatings and mutilation. 61% of the rapes we documented were gang-rapes by soldiers, while in 25% of the cases the rapes ended with the killing of the woman. Clearly, these military rapes are acts of vicious

performance – they send clear messages to survivors of military rape, victims' and survivors' families, and whole communities. These are war crimes designed and used specifically to demoralize and terrorize our people.

I will give you an example: a twelve-year old girl was taking hay to feed cattle in a field near a relocated village. Soldiers of the military regime found her, and they raped her and shot her. Some local villagers heard the gunfire and came to see what was happening. When they saw the dead body, they asked permission from the soldiers to bury the girl, but the soldiers ordered them to leave the body exposed to send a message to those in the village who might support the ethnic resistance. In another case, two young students, aged 17 and 18, were ordered to go to the local military base after they were overheard questioning the cruelty of military rule. As punishment, they were raped by officers of the base, who then demanded payment from the girls' parents for their release.

The truth is that all of these abuses -- burning of villages, raping of women, kidnapping people for forced labor – clearly demonstrate that the Burmese military regime is one of the world's most brutal military regimes. Unfortunately, like many people from Burma, I have seen these human rights abuses firsthand. As a young girl, I watched as soldiers from the ruling military regime seized my family's land and destroyed our livelihood. Even though we had farmed this land for many years, the military simply took it from us so they could resell it for profit to drug traffickers who had cash.

They did not only take land from my family, but from thousands of families as they handed over huge swaths of territories to their cronies in the narcotics business. They also took livestock, tools, and anything else they wanted. The Burmese military junta and their soldiers do not treat their own citizens as human beings – they treat us like animals.

Now, the effect of years of human rights abuses and brutal attacks is resulting in the fundamental destruction of even the most basic access to food and medicine. A groundbreaking report by the Shan Relief and Development Association has documented the destruction of rice production in the Shan State. It points out how corruption, cronyism, and human rights abuses have resulted in a precipitous decline in the production of rice, Burma's most basic staple.

Due to extensive relocations of villagers, rice production in the mountains has decreased by 80%. Overall, rice production in the area studied in the report decreased by an astonishing 56%. Villagers and farmers are left hungry and in need. Burma should be an incredibly wealthy country. Fifty years ago, Burma was considered the "rice bowl" of Asia. Sadly, economic mismanagement by the military regime is condemning millions of people to constant hunger, chronic malnutrition, and starvation.

Even though the regime cracks down on any political opposition, they allow drug warlords to operate.

Drug abuse is rampant and more and more young people have become addicted to opiates and amphetamine-type stimulants. In spite of the regime's claims about reducing opium production in Burma, it is being grown all over Shan State.

The situation for human rights in Burma is clearly very bad. However, there is also room for some hope and optimism. That is because despite the pressure from the military regime, the people of Burma have never given up their hope for human rights, freedom, and democracy.

We strongly support the efforts of Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy. No military regime can control a country forever, especially one that is hated by all the people. Aung San Suu Kyi is our nation's leader. Despite near assassination and spending years under arrest she remains the moral force that symbolizes my country's desire for national reconciliation.

I would like to thank the United States Congress for supporting the Burmese Freedom and Democracy Act. We used to believe that we were alone in the world – the Act proves that we are not. Strong support from the United States and European Union has also put pressure on the Association of Southeast Asian Nations to speak out more forcefully on Burma. Whereas four years ago Southeast Asian countries strongly supported Burma's military regime and defended its human rights abuses, now they are calling for human rights and democracy. Please support the Burmese Freedom and Democracy Act. It is an important tool in helping my country reach national reconciliation.

Second, I would like to ask the United States to work hard for a UN Security Council resolution on Burma. I have seen with my own eyes the devastating transnational effects of human rights abuses. Because of Burma's military regime, our country sends refugees, drugs, and HIV/AIDs to our neighboring countries. We desperately need the UN Security Council to pass a reasonable resolution facilitating change in Burma.

Thank you again for giving me the opportunity to share my story and the story of my people. We admire the values of the United States and we know that one day soon our country will find a brighter future through national reconciliation and peace.